DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 022 783 TE 500 132

By-Emig, Janet
ON TEACHING COMPOSITION: SOME HYPOTHESES AS DEFINITIONS.
National Council of Teachers of English, Champaign, Ill.
Pub Date [Oct 67]
Note-9p.
Journal Cit-Research in the Teaching of English; v1 n2 p127-35 Fall 1967
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.44
Descriptors-*COMPOSITION (LITERARY), COMPOSITION SKILLS (LITERARY), ENGLISH, *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, *HIGHER EDUCATION, *RESEARCH NEEDS, TEACHING METHODS, WRITING EXERCISES, *WRITING SKILLS

A definition of teaching is offered. Several hypotheses concerning the nature of the writing process and the factors effecting this process are discussed. The need for research on unexamined aspects of written composition is indicated. (BN)

RESEARCH IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH
Volume 1 Number 2 Fall 1967

Though Miss Emig's article is, as she has written elsewhere, "a quite private expression," it presents some hypotheses for research, a sort of informal taxonomy which may lead investigators to explore previously unexamined aspects of written composition.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

On teaching composition: some hypotheses as definitions

JANET EMIG
University of Chicago

TE 500 132
ED022783

"We teach composition." Whatever can we mean? Our rhetorics and practices down the centuries form a fantastic pop-op mobile—appalling, if we are free enough to be judgmental.

Around the mobile whirls:
A bar sinister of red pencils crosses a shield of paperback covers;
Exhortations rise up on a collage of grammar workbook sheets,
topical and contradictory as Chinese wall posters:
"Write more," "Write less"; "Revise," "Throw away";
At the base turns a combination retroactive multi-rocket tape recorder-opaque projector-computer
half-engorging a ventilated, crenellated program card;
At the top, like a Marisol, smiles out a photo of an actual animate—
A lay reader
(With that designation, shouldn't she be off gilding manuscripts? Or Deweyizing some order's library?)
What have we been thinking? What are we doing?

"Not much," some voices, quiet but acerb tell us—Sledd, Roberts. As Hemingway once wrote Marlene Dietrich, about another matter, "Movement is not action."

What could we possibly mean when we say we teach composition? Surely it is not premature to attempt some kind of systematic response.

TEACHING AS INTERVENTION

An essential prelude is to define what is meant, generically, by teaching. Teaching is the intervention, usually by an older person, into a process, usually of a younger person, to improve that process or the product of that process. Teaching can also be mutual intervention, an exchange of insights and competencies between older and younger (rare), or the exclusive unilateral intervention of a younger person into the process of an older person (unheard of).

Sermonettes will occur intermittently throughout this text. Sermonette I: For far too long, for far too many of us, the teaching of composition has been solely product-centered. We have been concerned exclusively with the piece of writing, more particularly the simonized draft submitted for the devastation and the grade. The sciences have long known and taught that getting there, like riding a Greyhound, is at least half the fun. Science and math instructors are quite as interested in the routes students take to a solution as in their identifications of the solutions themselves. Moreover, they know their significant teaching occurs before or during the time the student works in the laboratory, and they regard as very limited evidence of his intellectual evolution the slight, or full, reports the student hands to a lab assistant at the end of the session.

If teaching is intervention, the primal question in teaching composition is, of course, "In what kinds of intervention should we engage?" In teaching composition, as in most other forms of teaching, there are really only two significant modes of intervention: the proffering of freedoms and the establishing of constraints. The teaching of composition consists of determining and enacting strategies for intervention in one or both modes in whatever order best serves the writing process of the individual student and the piece he produces. Teaching can be the spontaneous, unpremeditated response to the moment, the student, or the piece. And it can consist of deciding *not* to intervene, as in dealing with the mature student who has already internalized and now enacts his own appropriate sets

of freedoms and constraints. If intervention occurs, however, the double question becomes the highly complex and immensely fragile one of how and when.

Sermonette II: For far too many of us, the definition of teaching composition, like our definition of teaching in general, is solely the specifying of constraints. By the definition given here, this means that we are fulfilling only half, or less, of our function; indeed, that our view of teaching is dangerously truncated, irresponsible, and anti-humanistic.

It is probably helpful to characterize the kinds of interventions, both freedoms and constraints, which we as teachers of composition can extend. The freedoms are all, basically, varieties of cognitive and affective support: (1) the provision of stimuli; (2) the extension of options, including the presentation of skills needed by a student for a given piece; and (3) the acceptance of divergent writing behavior. Species of the third are (a) allowing the student to choose his own subject and style of approach; (b) permitting him, tacitly or explicitly, to break off in process and not complete a given piece of writing; (c) withholding any form of evaluation, perhaps including praise; and (d) giving sanction for the student in some instances not to write at all.

To further define and taxonomize, stimuli are verbal and nonverbal ploys for setting the writing process into motion or for keeping it going. Verbal stimuli can be (a) the right kinds of assignments, oral or written; (b) teacher and student dialogue about the process of writing, professional and peer, and about specific products, most notably, of course, great pieces of literature; and (c) models offered by the writings of professionals and peers. Some might classify modeled writing as a constraint in that syntax is fixed; but many students find models stimuli for getting under way, and they are free to fill sentence patterns with any lexicon they choose. Actually, all of these examples could be regarded as species of both modes. The most skillful intervention may well combine the proffering of a freedom with the issuance of a constraint.

Nonverbal stimuli can be (a) incitements by other modes —music, painting, sculpture, mime, mass communication; (b) rituals; and, especially, (c) confrontations with the natural world. By rituals are meant those habits or compulsions that determine how a piece of writing is begun or continued—choosing certain kinds of writing instruments or paper and pursu-

ing such required indulgences as eating, drinking, or smoking.

The third freedom is the acceptance of divergent writing behavior, such as permitting a student to select his own subject or not to complete a piece of writing. Sermonette III: People outside schools usually have the option in some segment of their lives not to complete what they have begun. The lives of the highly creative abound in the unfinished—manuscripts, quartets, canvases, equations, theories. Why the ruthless puritanism of the schools? Why must the student finish everything he begins, especially when at some early moment both he and the teacher identify a piece as a loser? And when our own writing lives are filled with shards?

The withholding of evaluation is also an exemplar of freedom. The student is permitted at times to write without teacher as unsolicited evaluator, or even unsolicited reader.

Expectedly, teacher constraints are counterforms of these freedoms: (1) the rationing or removal of stimuli, (2) the establishing of parameters, such as helping the student to identify the audience to whom his piece will be directed and to heed conventions in whatever form he has selected, and (3) the interpretation of teacher support as certain kinds of insistences, such as the insistence at carefully selected times upon closure, that work be completed or completed and evaluated. The teacher's goal in this mode may ultimately be to help students appreciate the wisdom of Duke Ellington. When asked why he always composed for one orchestra whose weaknesses he knew as well as its strengths: he replied, "Limitations are a wonderful thing. Everyone should have them."

WRITING AS PROCESS

What is the nature of the writing process into which we as teachers intervene? In literary, rhetorical, and textbook canon there is a strong tradition that all writers engage in a monolithic process, with that process made up of three discrete components—planning, writing, and revising. Although these canons seldom supply tight or full descriptions for these components, teachers and textbook writers usually agree on the following operational definitions:

> *Planning* is the sum of those activities, mental and written, the writer engages in prior to producing a first draft.
>
> *Writing* is his effort to formulate—usually observing the grammatical requirements, semantic conventions, and graphic amenities of a language—an effective expressive or expressive-communicative sequence of words.

> *Revising* is that activity, or series of activities, by which the writer adjusts, at a time usually separated from the writing of a draft, part or all of that draft to more closely approximate certain substantive and stylistic aims.

The writing process is treated as a fixed and full ordering of these three components occurring in a lockstep, non-recursive, left-to-right sequence. In other words, one always plans, then writes, then revises with no backsliding or returning to a previous "stage." The straight line is the metaphor implied or stated throughout these descriptions as an apt metaphor for the writing process, both *in parte* and *in toto*. One starts at the beginning of the process and moves without confusion or diversion to the end, like the Israelis marching to the Suez.

I would like to suggest that this description of the writing process is a series of hypotheses calling for, if seldom receiving, systematic scrutiny, especially since it has been belied by many kinds of internal and external data—introspection; examination of our own drafts and those of others, both peer and professional; and our experience as teachers of composition.

One could equally, or more powerfully, hypothesize that the process of writing is not monolithic, or tri-partite, or non-recursive. That is, instead of a single process of writing there may be process*es* of writing, at least a process that can be changed—shortened, lengthened, transmogrified—by a number of variables. Instead of a process or processes inexorably made up of three "stages," there may be more or fewer components. Writing may be recursive, a loop rather than a linear affair—one can write, then plan; or one can revise, then write.

For the rest of this piece I will assume the second multiple hypothesis is valid. Five variables affect the length and nature of processes of writing. Four pertain to the student; one, to the intervener, the teacher. To this last I will devote my culminating discussion. The four that pertain to the student are (1) the sophistication of his skills, (2) his temperament, (3) his ego-strength, and (4) the nature of the mode in which he writes.

(1) The sophistication of a student writer's skills may affect the nature and length of the writing process. In some of my own inquiries, for example, I have found that very able eleventh and twelfth grade writers often do not make any written conspectus for pieces of discursive prose under 500 words. Yet if one questions these students about the plan they followed,

they orally give highly elaborated outlines, complete with sub-subtopics and other accoutrements of that art form. And when forced by a teacher to produce a written outline, they invariably oblige by providing a construct *a posteriori*.

(2) Temperament also affects the process of writing. There are student writers, like mature writers, for whom revision is anathema. This does not mean that they are unwilling or unable to reconsider a writing problem. Rather, they prefer a total rewriting to a partial revision.

(3) The ego-strength of the writer is a highly significant variable in the writing process, and one almost wholly ignored. Its presence or absence affects many phases of the process, and particularly the evaluation that follows the process. If teacher evaluation is negative, for example, does the student become daunted and refuse to write, or does criticism spur him to persist?

It is sometimes difficult to tell by behavior alone whether its sources are the same, since behaviors may have different origins. For example, the writer with faint ego-strength and the writer with strong temperament may both refuse to revise. There are, however, quite different motivations for their refusal: for writers with certain temperaments, the task is too boring; for writers with faint ego-strength the task is too threatening or painful. But both motivations affect the process of writing the same way: they eliminate revision, the third "stage."

(4) Mode has a marked effect upon the nature of the writing process. For the teaching of composition two undeniably significant dimensions of mode are the impulse behind the writing and, intertwined, the audience for whom a piece is intended. The impulse can be sheerly expressive, or it can also be communicative. I will assume that most students write in both the expressive and communicative modes in schools or with school sanction. Sermonette IV: This assumption is, of course, false. Far too many American teachers of composition (to contrast here with British) give sanction only to communicative, to all that we mean by expository, writing. This focus, which probably emanates from a narrow definition of rhetoric in New England schools, academies, colleges, and universities in the nineteenth century, can be regarded as an unhappy manifestation of American pragmatism. This exclusiveness can be formulated as follows, "The imagination is no

damn good unless it propels events in the 'real' world, such as the hanging of witches, or the dropping of napalm." There are two major reasons for the neglect of expressive (imaginative) writing: we have not developed criteria for evaluating writing in this mode, which is really to say we do not read enough, especially the absolutely contemporary writers, to give appropriate models to help us cross the generation gap; and we are afraid of any personal statement, especially by the young.

If the impulse is expressive, the audience initially and perhaps ultimately is the writer himself. The writer has committed a private act. If the impulse is communicative as well as expressive—by very definition a public act—the audience becomes one other or a group of others. The continuum here is probably from an audience of one known, a teacher or peer, through a group of increasing size of knowns, to an audience of unknowns, both in locus and in characteristics. At this last level one may again write for himself through the inability of imagination to identify those others; but it is now a self assiduously divided, with discerning reader and critic separated from initiator and writer.

Forms in which expressive writing seek shape are the brief outcry of thought or feeling; the sustained self-examination such as the diary, the journal, and the verse and prose autobiography; and certain kinds of letters. Expressive writings can of course achieve art. The brief outcry can become the quatrains of Dickinson, the terrible sonnets of Hopkins, the elegies of Rilke, or the dream songs of Berryman. Sustained self-examinations can become the diaries of St. John of The Cross or Gide or Harold Nicholson; or the journals of Mansfield, Fitzgerald, and Hammarskjold. They can become the long verse autobiographies—"The Prelude" of Wordsworth, and "Life Studies" of Lowell; or the prose autobiography—the *Confessions* of Augustine and Rousseau, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* by de Beauvoir, *Advertisements for Myself* by Mailer. They can become, finally, the letters one writes to oneself disguised as others, for example, John Keats to his brother Tom, Dilke or Shelley.

Forms in which communicative writing seek shape are the familiar ones set forth in rhetoric and composition casebooks and other texts: the straightforward one-to-one message, the elaborated exposition, the baroque argument, the polished

critical statement. For examples of these, see any good rhetoric text, such as Connolly's *A Rhetoric Casebook.*

How do these dimensions of mode affect the writing process? Both early and late, teacher intervention differs according to whether the impulse behind the piece is expressive or communicative. (No matter the mode, the center of the process—the first sustained writing out—remains, I think, inviolate to any intervention.) Basically, with expressive writing the focus is upon nonintervention or upon intervention enacted chiefly as the proffering of freedoms; with communicative, upon helping students to acknowledge growing or changing sets of constraints. With pieces of expressive writing, for example, planning may be informal or nonexistent. In contrast, with certain kinds of communicative writing, planning under teacher guidance may prove both formal and elaborate, as in the production of a brief for a written debate.

In a thoughtful article, Charles J. Calitri suggests that the teacher evaluation *following* the writing process also differs according to the mode in which the student writes.* To use his metaphor, the teacher sets a different "contract" with the student depending upon that mode. Generally, with the expressive mode (Calitri's term is *autistic,* which I find too clinical), the teacher does not evaluate the writing; with communicative, he sets different contracts depending upon whether the student is attempting to convey a one-to-one message, write a simple piece of exposition, or produce a polished critical essay. Evaluation grows more rigorous as the mode becomes more complex.

APPLICATION IN TEACHING

How can we determine what kinds of freedom to proffer or constraints to establish? In part, we respond to the variables elaborated above. If we are to heed these, we clearly need a profound preknowledge of every student writing under our care. We can come into this knowledge by a double route: we must ask and we must observe. Early in our experiences with them, we should ask students to keep writing diaries in which they recount how they set about and persist in writing. To determine dimensions to include, classes can read together and discuss professional writers' accounts of their styles and processes of writing. Anthologies we can use include the two volumes of the *Paris Review Interviews: Writers at Work* (1958

*C. J. Calitri, "A structure for teaching the language arts," *Harvard Educational Review,* 1965, 35, 481-491.

and 1963); *Counterpoint* (1964), edited by Roy Newquist; and the senior in the series, *Modern Writers at Work* (1930), edited by Josephine Piercy. Dimensions students will probably elect to discuss are time and place of writing, rituals associated with beginning and persisting, instruments of writing employed, attitudes toward formal planning, point of view toward revising versus revision, and responses to different kinds of teacher evaluation.

We need also to observe, which means that early in the semester or quarter students should write under our direct surveillance. We need to query the students about what they are doing as well as to observe, allowing, of course, for the artificiality and self-consciousness such a situation will probably evoke.

Commiseration I (in lieu of Sermonette V): Yes, I hear the murmurs and the mutters; and yes, I agree. Such a definition of teaching composition calls for a ferocious amount of work. I would suggest another less complex and taxing way, if I knew one that was honest and valid.

Such a definition of teaching composition calls for more than work. It calls for a certain kind of teacher. Indeed, the key variable that determines the direction and success of that complexity the teaching of composition is, ultimately, the teacher. How and when we intervene in the writing process of our students depends at last upon our knowledge of the writing process and of our students and upon our tact, taste, and sensibility. Most frightening and challenging of all, to establish constraints may well mean that we ourselves are disciplined and controlled persons as well as writers; to proffer freedoms may well require that we ourselves are free.

COPYRIGHT 1967 BY THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY National Council of Teachers of English TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."